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Ragsdale noted as being a ‘champion for equality’

Karla Clark - Jacksonville Daily Progress

JACKSONVILLE — Former state Rep. Paul Ragsdale was a heavyweight championing civil rights since the 1970s who didn't stop swinging even with his 1986 retirement from the legislature.

“He was a champion for equality,” said Cherokee County Commissioner Katherine Pinotti. “A very quiet man, a very kind man and very statesman-like. When he spoke, he spoke with authority. You paid attention when he talked.”

Ragsdale, of Jacksonville, died Sunday at age 66, marking the early closing of a life dedicated to serving Texas citizens, Cherokee County Democratic Chairman Ceasar Roy said.

“He was a friend and my cousin,” Roy said. He was an amiable and jovial individual, but also a no-nonsense legislator.”

First elected in 1972 to Dallas' 110th district, Ragsdale was one of the first African American legislators elected to the Texas House since Reconstruction. Ragsdale retired from the legislature in 1986.

With seven other legislators, Ragsdale founded the Texas Legislative Black Caucus in 1973 to address the issues that African Americans faced across the state of Texas.

According to Texas legislative records, Ragsdale authored more than 124 House bills.

Ragsdale also championed Black History Week in Texas, designated as the second week in February.

Ragsdale also authored legislation which changed how certain school districts elect their board members. The bill provided for the creation of single-member trustee districts in school districts where members were formerly elected at-large.

Because of Ragsdale, pictures of black citizens who served in the Texas Legislature and Constitutional Convention before 1900 now hang in the Capitol for permanent display.

Roy said he remembered Ragsdale's efforts to champion single-member districts.

“When he was in Dallas, all the city council members were elected at large,” Roy said. “He fought hard against it and eventually single member districts came to pass.”

Roy said another memory sticks out regarding his cousin's career.

“At one point, Paul filed for food stamps to emphasize the fact that Texas legislators are grossly underpaid,” Roy said. “Eventually legislators' pay increased.”

Through the tenure of his legislative career, Ragsdale remained single, Roy said.

“He didn't let any distractions deter him... He didn't get married in that period because he was single minded about accomplishing his duties as a legislator,” Roy said.

Roy said he believes much of Ragsdale's work ethic stemmed from the traumatic death of his father in his early childhood.

“Much of his drive comes from an incident in his past... Paul and his brother were quite young at the time,” Roy said. “His philosophy and work ethic had to do with that traumatic event, he wanted a future for himself.”

Ragsdale also had a lighter side, shown in his authorship of House Resolution 75, challenging the Louisiana House of Representatives to a game of basketball.

Though Ragsdale's legislative career came to a close in 1986, he still advocated the rights of community members in Cherokee County.

Pinotti said Ragsdale continued to work for his community after he retired and relocated to her third precinct.

Pinotti said Ragsdale's voice was instrumental in keeping the Pine Grove community intact during the July redistricting hearings.

“During the redistricting hearings, he asked me if they were going to keep the black community constant in the Pine Grove area,” Pinotti said.

“All of the Pine Grove community stayed intact, and afterward Paul came by and thanked me. He was very instrumental in making sure the residents in 1804 stayed in one precinct,” Pinotti said.

Roy said Ragsdale continued an active membership in the local Democratic party, but remained retired from political office.

“Obviously it was a life cut short too soon,” Roy said. “I had been working hard with Paul to become even more involved in local politics, and he was just about ready.”

Funeral arrangements are pending.